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GSU History: Older Students continue to Make the Grade

By Marilyn Thomas
(12th in a series)

The average student at Governors State University is 34 years old, with family obligations and a job. It's been that way from the beginning.

Most professors find these students appealing. Some, like photography Professor Paul Schanz who joined the staff in 1973, remember when many faculty were younger than their students. Although that doesn't necessarily hold true now, Schranz says there is great satisfaction in teaching an adult student.

"The nice thing about teaching here, as opposed to a place where you have a lot of young kids, its real hard to teach creativity to young people. They haven't had any life. They haven't done anything to express themselves. I don't have that problem here," he argues.

"The GSU students have spunk and they always have and I love it," says Professor Bethe Hagens. "They continually surprise me...because they're into life...it's a continual surprise to me who shows up in my classes and they always seem better."

In the strictest sense, GSU is a place to come and learn. There are no dorms. The majority of GSU's classes are offered in the evenings to better accommodate the working student. Off-campus sites, such as local high schools, put the learning opportunity closer to home.

Tom Dascenzo, director of the Office of Student Life, says when GSU was designed in 1969, its mission was to meet students' needs. That hasn't changed.

"Most are here because they don't have a lot of money, because they're site-bound, or because they have role responsibilities in life...and that doesn't mean their education has to be inferior," Dascenzo argues.

Professor Paul Green agrees. "We still kept the notion that people that work, that are more mature students can go to college and improve themselves, so we never lost that innovative thing."

Professor Michael Stelnicki says that as GSU evolved into a more traditional university, its student population shifted somewhat. "They've changed from the more bohemian kind of student to the more traditional kind of student."

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Alumna Pat Gardner says GSU's conversion to a graded system did change her opinion of the school. But, she adds, she chose GSU in 1982 over other schools because GSU offered her a personalized program.

"When I came here I checked out Columbia College, the Art Institute and this place, and besides it being convenient, I liked this place better. I liked the atmosphere better. I liked the teachers better. I liked the whole concept better. The way things were done just seemed to be more comfortable," Gardner explains.

Her positive experiences have rubbed off. Her daughter is now a student at GSU. Dascenzo says that case is a perfect example of GSU's vitality.

"We say our traditional student is everybody else's non-traditional student. The only thing about GSU students is they are more dissimilar than they are similar...It's not dissimilar to me to have a 24-year-old who's talking about dating with a 72-year-old who's dying of cancer. You don't find that at an eastern school where everybody in a dorm is probably homogeneous."

On commencement day 1990, the GSU Hall of Governors was filled with graduates who represented every sector of society. They were being rewarded for their achievements, but they all agreed that the diplomas they were receiving were because of Governors State's efforts to serve students.

"I stayed out of school for 30 years," one graduate said. "I'm a grandmother so I felt kind of funny coming back, overwhelmed. I thought everyone would be so much younger, but I felt at home because the age limit is from one end to the other..."

Another said, "GSU allowed me to go back to school...in between my four years I got married, had a child and so it was real flexible and accessible to me."

"It meant a change in my life. I transferred from ISU. The smaller class size) here has helped my grade point and I've excelled intellectually here and I appreciate that," this young graduate said.

Another echoed his sentiments. "GSU has changed my entire life. I always wanted to be a professional person and I have a job, a scholarship to the University of Chicago. It has changed my life completely...when I first came here I saw a sign on the door that said this is the place to finish what you started. They did not lie. It is."